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She had only one real weapon—her voice . . .

THE RETURN OF BRIDGET



by **JACK RITCHIE**

I had killed the woman. There was no doubt about that. If only she hadn't tossed that damn can of peas at me.

I had entered the supermarket just before closing time and wheeled a cart down one of the aisles, randomly removing from the shelves an item here and an item there. I did not expect to take any of them with me when I departed.

At nine o'clock, the IN door of the supermarket had been locked and

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the twenty or so customers remaining in the store gradually finished their shopping and gravitated toward the checkout counters. I, however, continued to linger in the aisles.

Some fifteen minutes passed before a rather statuesque woman in her forties, wearing the red manager's jacket, approached me.

"Sir," she said, "it's closing time."

I glanced down the aisle. The remaining customers had departed and only a single gum-chewing cashier remained at her post, glaring significantly in my direction. The other cashier and store personnel had apparently departed, not being prone to linger past working hours.

I pushed my cart to the front of the store, noting through the show windows that the parking lot was now empty, except for my own vehicle.

I shoved the cart aside and produced my gun. I spoke to the red-jacketed woman. "You will kindly hand me all of your cash. At this time of night, I suspect that most of it is already in the store safe."

There had been a freeze reaction while the two women adjusted to the fact that they were being held up.

The manageress's eyes narrowed, and I could see she was about to go into action.

"Madam," I said, "if I were you, I would not attempt—"

My warning was too late.

Her hand found a can on the shelf next to her and she flung it in my direction. It seemed to travel through the air at slow-motion pace and I distinctly remember that its label indicated that it contained peas.

The can struck me on the upper arm and my finger convulsively pulled the trigger of the gun. The manageress's eyes indicated cosmic surprise and she slipped to the floor, irrevocably dead.

The cashier fainted.

I sighed, thrust the revolver back in my pocket, and walked out to my waiting car. Inside it, I sat for perhaps a minute before I turned the ignition key.

I drove to the harbor bridge. Traffic was light and I braked to a stop. Leaving the engine running, I went to the railing and heaved the gun out as far as I could. My false beard followed.

Then I returned to the car and drove until I was approximately two blocks from my apartment building. There I abandoned the automobile and walked the rest of the way.

In my fourth-floor apartment, I took off my coat, hat, and gloves. I could have used a stiff drink, but I settled for a glass of water.

I sat down. Well, what was done was done.

How efficient were the police? It didn't really matter if anyone had succeeded in getting my license number since I had stolen the automobile, but had I been followed?

In the distance I heard the sound of a police siren. I listened, feeling resigned, but the patrol car passed my building and continued on its way.

I felt quite tired, very possibly an emotional reaction to the killing. I got into my pajamas and pulled down the Murphy bed.

I thought I might have some difficulty getting to sleep, but I dropped off immediately.

I woke to the sound of the neighborhood church bell striking two A.M. I lay there, my eyes closed, but I had the distinct feeling that I was not alone in the room. I opened my eyes.

She stood at the foot of the bed in her red jacket, her face coldly pale. I half expected to see a bullet hole and bloodstains, but I was spared that much.

Yes, I thought, I'm having a nightmare. It's to be expected.

Her eyes fixed mine. "I am Bridget O'Keefe. You murdered me last night." She peered a bit closer. "You *are* Oliver Wilson, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid so."

"What happened to your beard?"

"It was false."

She accepted that. "Oliver Wilson," she repeated, "you murdered me."

"It was an accident, I assure you. When I entered your store I had no intention of shooting anyone."

"Then why did you carry a loaded weapon?"

"A matter of psychology. If my gun were empty, I might have exhibited a lack of confidence in what I was doing."

"The fact remains that I am dead and you are alive and lying there scot free. I want you to go to the police and confess your crime."

I demurred. "At my age, I think I would have difficulty adjusting to prison life."

She smiled tightly. "In that case, I intend to haunt you until you turn

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yourself in. I'll be with you always, wherever you go, though you travel to the ends of the earth."

"Madam," I said, "I'm a very tired man and I need my rest. I am now retreating to deeper sleep and you will dissolve."

I closed my eyes. After a while I peeked through slitted eyelids. She still stood there, thoughtful but uncertain.

I waited another five minutes before I looked again. This time she was gone.

I slept deeply until almost ten the next morning.

When I opened my eyes I saw Bridget O'Keefe on the couch at the foot of the bed, staring intently at the cover of a library book I had left on the footstool. I was a bit shaken. I was definitely not dreaming now. Was I hallucinating?

I watched her for a while and then said, "Why the devil are you staring at the cover of that book?"

"I'm not staring at the cover," she replied without looking up. "I'm reading the book. I'm on page 112. Being ethereal, I can't open books or turn pages, but I *can* see through to any pages I want, even the reverse sides."

I sighed. "I suppose you've come back to haunt me?"

"Let me finish this chapter first."

I went to the bathroom and closed the door. She didn't follow. After I washed, I returned and pushed the Murphy bed back into the wall.

Bridget finished her chapter and looked about the room. "I gather you're not a very successful hold-up man, or why would you live in this miserable walk-up apartment?"

Her eyes seemed to focus on something beyond the room. "I deduce that you eat out a lot. There are no dirty dishes in the sink."

Whether this was a dream or a hallucination, I thought I ought to make some effort to end it. "Madam, if I deprived your husband of your connubial companionship, I am deeply sorry. If I separated children from their mother, I am devastated. But I still have no intention of turning myself over to the police."

"The only relative I have is my niece, Annie, in Cleveland," she said. "I suppose you're going out for breakfast now?"

I thought about it. "It's much too late for breakfast. I'll skip it."

"You shouldn't. A good breakfast starts the day."

I began gathering together all the library books in my apartment. There were six of them, all mysteries. I put on my topcoat, hat, and gloves.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'm returning these books to the library."

She surveyed the books under my arm with her other-world vision.

"I see you use scraps of paper as bookmarks."

I shrugged. "I suppose so."

"The bookmarks would indicate that you haven't finished three of the books. So why are you taking them back to the library?"

"They're overdue."

"No, they aren't. I distinctly see that they're all due on the sixteenth. Today is the fourteenth."

"Madam, I don't believe in waiting until the very last moment. Besides, I've found these volumes extremely dull, and I'm not so compulsively obsessive that I must finish every book I begin." I opened the door to the hall.

"I'll be coming along," Bridget said.

"It's nippy out," I told her. "Hardly weather for anyone wearing a flimsy red jacket."

"I don't need to worry about weather any more," she countered. "And nobody will be able to see or hear me but you, so you needn't be embarrassed by my presence."

As we walked to the neighborhood library, Bridget began a discourse on atonement for one's sins, murder in particular.

At the library I returned the books and was about to leave when Bridget asked, "Aren't you taking any books out? There are two shelves of new detective novels in the special section."

"Madam," I said, "I doubt very much if you would allow me the peace and quiet to read any one of them."

The librarian at the desk looked up, her face startled, and I realized that as far as she was concerned, I had been talking loudly to myself.

I quickly left the building, Bridget following at my side. "I was talking about atonement for sins," she said.

I sighed. "Must you?"

She nodded. "Since I'm no longer of the flesh I can't choke people or push them down stairs or off cliffs. I have only one real weapon—my voice. And I intend to use it."

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"That's not haunting, that's nagging. I suppose you're going to continue talking until the sound of your voice either drives me mad or to the police station?"

"That's the general idea."

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The day being rather pleasant, and the prospect of returning to my dreary apartment unappealing, I decided on a long walk instead. I turned in the direction of one of the city parks, Bridget O'Keefe at my side, doing rather well on the subject of conscience and responsibility for one's actions.

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During the course of the morning and early afternoon, I learned that she was forty-five and had been an only child, so it had fallen upon her to take care of her aging parents. Her father died seven years ago and her mother soon after. She had been working for the same supermarket chain since she was eighteen and had spent twenty years operating a register at the checkout counter. It was boring but women had no opportunity for advancement in those days. However, she had been an assistant manager for seven years, and had just been promoted to manager on the night shift. The store was her responsibility from 5 P.M. until 9 P.M. six days a week.

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The company had provided the red jacket, but it was tailored for a man so she had had to alter it. But she didn't mind that too much because she liked to sew. And she'd been the manager just four months, which was why she had thrown the can of peas. She didn't want it on her record that her store had been robbed while she still had an ounce of breath to defend it.

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We got back to the apartment around two o'clock. I picked up an old newspaper and began ostentatiously reading.

Bridget was not deterred. She continued talking.

I realized myself.
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I looked up from the newspaper. "Suppose," I said, "just *suppose* that I actually did go to the police and tell them I killed you last night? What do you think would happen?"

"They'd arrest you."

"But they couldn't prove that I killed you."

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"What proof do they need? You simply confess and that should be that."

I shook my head. "That doesn't necessarily follow. After any killing in a city of this size, the police are usually plagued by individuals who

are only too eager to confess to the crime, for various clinical reasons of their own. I wouldn't be at all surprised if half a dozen people have already admitted to my crime, perhaps more convincingly than I could."

She thought about that. "Well, Ellie could identify you. She was at the checkout counter."

"I wore a beard."

"How about taking your gun to the police? They could compare bullets, and that should nail it down."

"Unfortunately, I flung the weapon into the harbor. At this moment it is in muck under perhaps sixty feet of water. I doubt very much whether it could be recovered."

"But your fingerprints. They should be all over the things in your shopping cart and that ought to establish your presence at the scene of the crime."

"I wore gloves."

There was a silence of perhaps five minutes.

"I have it," she said finally. "The police can give you a lie-detector test."

"The findings of lie detectors are not accepted as evidence in this state."

"Well, you can't just sit there and give up so easily. You've got to think of something that will put you in jail."

"Madam," I said, "at this moment, I intend to do nothing more than take a nap." I lay down on the couch and put the newspaper over my face.

"You're not fooling me," she said firmly. "You slept until ten this morning. You couldn't possibly be ready for a nap."

She resumed her oral vendetta, dwelling on the subject of perseverance over obstacles. However, she gradually glissanded into the narrative of her trip to Yellowstone National Park the year before, claiming she had slides in her apartment to prove it.

Actually, her voice was rather soothing. I found myself nodding, and finally I dropped off to sleep behind the newspaper.

I don't know how long I napped, but when I awakened I heard:

"Voltaire has remarked that King William never appeared to full advantage but in difficulties and in action. The same remark may be made on General Washington, for the character fits him."

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I removed the newspaper from my face.

Bridget sat in an easy chair, a faraway look in her eyes. "There is a natural firmness in some minds which cannot be unlocked by trifles, but which, when unlocked, discovers a cabinet of fortitude . . ."

"Bridget," I said, "what the devil are you talking about?"

She smiled. "I'm filibustering."

"Filibustering?"

"Yes. Like in Congress when there's some bill a senator doesn't want passed, so he gets up and talks and talks. He talks about the bill for as long as he can, but there's only so much you can say on any subject. Still, he doesn't want to give up the floor, so he begins to read things aloud—like his hometown newspaper, or a government bulletin, or *Gone With the Wind*. It doesn't really matter what it is, and he can go on for days."

"And so you are filibustering because you have run out of original words?"

"From *The Writings of Thomas Paine*. I'm reading the pamphlet, *The American Crisis*."

"I don't remember owning or borrowing the book."

"It's in the next apartment, being used to prop up the corner of a dresser."

I lay there while she finished *The American Crisis* and moved on to *The Rights of Man*.

At eight o'clock I sat up. "Well, Bridget, I'm going to hit the hay."

She stopped reading. "This early?"

I went to the bathroom and got into my pajamas. When I returned, I pulled down the Murphy bed. "I've had a long day and I'm really quite tired. I should pop off to sleep immediately."

She thought it over. "Well, perhaps you're right. I'm beginning to get a little hoarse."

I got into bed and closed my eyes. After five minutes I opened them. Bridget was gone. I waited another fifteen minutes, thinking she might return to check up on me, then I got up and dressed, put on my topcoat and hat, and left the apartment.

It was a long walk, but eventually I stood in the middle of the harbor bridge. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my last three pennies. What the devil could three pennies buy these days anyway? I

tossed them over the railing.

I took off my hat. Why had I worn it anyway? It would only blow off. I wedged it into an interstice of the railing. Perhaps someone else could use it. I took off my topcoat, folded it neatly, and put it on the walk beside the hat.

I looked down into the blackness. I had always been a bit nervous about heights. I closed my eyes and was ready.

"Oliver," Bridget said sharply, "put on your damn hat. And the topcoat too."

We entered the supermarket at approximately twenty minutes to nine, and Bridget showed me a nook where I could hide. I remained concealed until nine-thirty, when Bridget informed me that the store was now closed and empty of all personnel.

She led me to the safe in the manager's small office.

"I really should have done some research before I started haunting you," she said. "I didn't know that you were once nearly rich, but your financial adviser absconded to Costa Rica with all your money. Why didn't you just get a job like ordinary people do?"

"At the age of fifty-three? Frankly, I'm unemployable, Bridget. I possess no marketable skills."

"And your pride prevented you from accepting charity, so you decided to steal."

"It was my first attempt," I said. Bridget had provided me with the safe's combination, and I now proceeded to open it. "I thought you were going to be my lookout."

"I am," Bridget said. "The nearest police car is parked three and a half blocks away. At this moment one of the officers is napping and the other is crunching an antacid tablet."

I removed the packets of bills from the safe.

"You'd better fill a bag with groceries before you leave," she advised. "I know your cupboard is bare. I should have known you were actually starving when you didn't eat anything all day. And those library books. You were taking them back even though you hadn't finished some of them because you wanted to put your affairs in order."

When we left the store, I had the money and my groceries in a heavy brown paper bag.

"You might just as well move into my apartment," Bridget said. "It's

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sunny and cheerful. I don't know how long it will take to settle my estate so you can move in officially, but in the meantime get the superintendent to let you see the apartment and I'll show you where there's an extra key you can palm."

"Why would I want to palm the key?"

"Because until you move in permanently you'll have to slip in every few days or so to water my plants. And you might as well empty the refrigerator. The food will spoil if it stays there too long. My niece Annie gets everything I have and I can't change that, but I think she'll jump at the chance to sell you my furniture if you make her a fair offer. And there are three poinsettias in the closet. They have to have a period of dormancy so you can get them to bloom on Christmas, and a dark closet is an ideal place to put them, but in thirty-two more days, take them out, put them in a sunny place, and give them a long drink of water. And dust gets on the leaves of my rubber plants, so take a damp cloth and . . ."

"Bridget," I said. "For a little while—at least until I've eaten—would you please shut up?"

There was a two-second silence. "Yes, dear."

Yes, dear?

I shrugged. Well, why not?

As it was, I would have forgotten about the poinsettias entirely if Bridget hadn't been there to remind me.



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